

Benefits of Difficulty

Ephesians 5.15-16

Whether we like it or not we live in a world that is not perfect. God defines it in the Bible as a fallen world. Sin and the consequences of sin surround us. Hardship, difficulty, worry and fears are normal events in everyone's life.

Difficulties are not a passing problem that we can duck and allow to blow over our heads, like a passing storm. They are part of the normal conditions that we call life.

Often our response to problems and difficulties is "Why me?"

But stop for a moment and consider if you had a perfect life, with everything sweetness and harmony, in such a life would you need God? If everything was joyful and pleasant, would we even remember God?

We come to know God when we cry out to him and ask him to help us in our need.

In the 23rd Psalm, the psalmist writes, 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and staff, they comfort me.'

Those words only become a living reality when we have found ourselves in that valley of doom and despair. There, in a place that is full of gloom and sorrow and despair, we learn to cry out to the Lord.

And afterwards we can look back and say, God used my difficulties to advance my spiritual growth. I had to cope with adversity, and God taught me that he brings comfort into discomfort and hope where there is despair.

The Bible reveals a number of reasons why God allows us to walk into difficulty. And the main reason is that he wants us to see things from His point of view.

God made us, so he knows us better than anyone else. He knows that when we are angry or bitter we can be determined to take action in our own way, and we will have little regard for God's point of view. It is only when circumstances overwhelm us that we give Him our full attention.

Saul of Tarsus had this experience. He was angry and bitter with the teaching of the Apostles. He was determined to exterminate the teaching he hated. In his zeal to destroy the disciples he set out for Damascus and on the way he suddenly found himself struck blind and he fell to the ground. He could have cried out, "That's not fair! Why me?" But instead he cried out, "Who are you Lord?"

God has a point of view. Paul knew it. Through this sudden blindness God had totally captured Paul's attention. And what must have seemed to Paul to be the end of his life, in fact was the beginning of an extraordinary and fruitful life in the service of our Lord.

From this we can see that God can use difficulty to capture our attention.

God also uses adversity to remind us that it is his reality that matters. Times of difficulty can cause us to consider what is important in our life. This kind of self-examination is healthy when it causes us to consider our attitudes and behaviour.

Sometimes, when what we experience is painful enough, our difficulties or unhappiness can cause us to ask ourselves deep questions. Sometimes what trouble dredges up are fears and frustrations and suffering from childhood or early life are still affecting us and driving our attitudes.

We can go through life with attitudes and reactions that stem from some vulnerability, or rejection, or a sense of worthlessness that stems from something long ago in our past. And it can take adversity in our life to force the old resentment to the surface where it can be dealt with by the grace of God.

Paul in the second letter he wrote to the Corinthians, said he had prayed three times to God for the removal of what he calls a 'thorn in the flesh'. We do not know for certain what he was referring to. Some commentators suggest he had recurring eye troubles. It is reasonable to assume that Paul said to himself, "why me? Why have I got this trouble?" And the answer he gives is that the trouble reminds him how much he needs God,

God also uses adversity to teach us another point of view, his point of view. People who used to smoke are often the people in restaurants who most find smoking offensive. They find the smell offensive and it spoils the taste of their own meal.

God uses suffering because of sin to help us turn away from what is wrong. We find our old habits become distasteful and we cease to desire things that we once wanted. Things we once did now seem offensive to us.

David, in Psalm 119 says, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees."

What David is saying is that in his case his affliction was at the hands of God and it was for his own good, reminding David of God's great love. Just as a parent lovingly disciplines a child to prevent the child developing harmful thinking and behaviour, so our heavenly Father trains us through adversity to walk more closely with him.

God told Abraham to sacrifice his son. His purpose was, through the pain of obedience, to teach Abraham the meaning of real faith. When Abraham came off that mountain both he and his son understood more about a spiritual relationship with God, and walking in faithful acceptance of God's word, than they could ever have known before.

Abraham would have known more about himself that he had ever known before. Isaac, who had seen the blade of the knife above him, is unlikely to have ever forgotten the experience. Isaac would also have seen that his father believed that faithful obedience to God has no boundaries.

So when God sends difficult times to us, do we give up in despair or do we stand firm in faith, trusting the Lord to teach us, strengthen us and to bring a good benefit out of the difficult circumstances.

The evidence of the Bible is that God does not send more than we have the capacity to bear, and God's purpose is to give us cause to pause, reflect, consider and change, so that the difficulty becomes to us a blessing that strengthens us.

If adversity touches our life, instead of running from it, instead ask the Lord, "what is it that you want to teach me? What do I need to learn and to understand?"